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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to determine the characteristics of potential students for a multi-media off-campus approach to college education. The Nebraska program is modeled after England's Open University. Key questions focus on unique student characteristics and needs which would influence course development. Responses from 4,000 adults and high school students were screened to develop a pool of "likely" clientele. This group proved to be significantly different from an uninterested group, but quite heterogeneous in age, education, and interests. These results indicate that planners must attend to individual differences much greater than those encountered in typical on-campus settings. (Author)

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An Open University for the Midlands:

Why and For Whom?

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Purpose

One of the major thrusts of higher education today is to make college credit more accessible to people wherever they may live or work, or whatever their particular life circumstances. Accessibility currently implies more than open admissions, increased financial aids for minority students or being within commuting distance for local students. It means reaching students where they are at physically and educationally. Greater sophistication of telecommunication delivery systems now makes reaching potential student audience groups easier. Video and audio cassettes open up more options for making individual courses available through broadcasts, at local learning centers and even in the home.

Two natural questions arise: 1) why should higher education extend its efforts to reach out beyond its walls and not only reach students via the mailbox but indeed provide educational experiences via television and other media directly into students' homes? and 2) what kinds of people are interested in a multi-media off-campus approach to college education? Is there an actual adult clientele not now being served? The focus of this study is on the second question, but a brief examination of the first question, "the why," will put the question of "for whom" into better perspective.

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The Why

The Open University in England began with some 25,000 students and expects to reach eventual enrollments of 40,000. Through the use of television, filmstrips, textual materials, and audio cassettes the program is designed to provide collegiate experiences to English citizens who have not had access to higher education as have most Americans. Why would such a program be of interest in this country? With colleges sprinkled like a pox on a map of this country, why would anyone think that a college education is not accessible to all? With special financial packages available to low income students why would anyone think that higher education is not within the pocketbook range of anyone seriously interested? If one still persists that not everyone is physically or financially within reach of a college education, what about correspondence courses?

Despite these tough questions, interest in the open university concept and external degree programs in this country has gathered a momentum that has neither reached fruition or peaked yet. This year Open University courses are being tried at Rutgers, in Houston and in San Diego. The recommendations of the Commission on Non-Traditional Study reassert the importance of educational technology and making higher education truly accessible to adults. (The Chronicle of Higher Education, February 5, 1973.) Though the higher education establishment is suspicious of movements that become fads which in turn soon become outmoded, some pundits have characterized the movement as an idea whose time has come. The 1973 meeting of the American Association of Higher Education focused on external degree programs which suggests that its time is now.

There are probably a dozen reasons, not all of which can be listed here, why the movement has gained a foothold in this country where we have recently thought that higher education was available to all. One must first remember that as many as 350 universities and colleges in the United States are either planning or intend to become involved in some form of external degree programs (Freedman, 1972).

Over a hundred years ago the land grant colleges committed themselves as service institutions for the citizens of their state. Extension and correspondence services have gone a long way to meet these needs. Yet, the concept of a real college education has been synonomous with an on-campus experience.

The recent success of Sesame Street and Electric Company has broken asunder many traditional concepts about children, television, and learning. Television college courses are not new but until recently they have been mostly lecture experiences and less than successful for audiences not attuned to television. These new efforts with younger children suggest that education via television can and perhaps must be both educational and entertaining.

Lastly, for the moment, we must try in our concern for the new student (Cross, 1972) to remember the forgotten student, the older citizen beyond the 18-24 age range whose past and current life circumstances do not permit enrollment on a college campus. The housewife who finds it difficult to leave the house, the working young adults who have acquired too many debts to quit work and go back to school, and even the senior citizen who would like to fulfill some unfinished dream are citizens whose educational needs and interests have not been fully tapped. The concept of the late bloomer is perhaps more appropriate for this population than it is for a school age population. How many adults awaken again to the need to enrich their life, to gain more knowledge, and perhaps even college credit in the process years after they have left school? How many bright, but naive adults have been frightened by the thought of college because of a stereotyped image of both themself and the college experience?

There are those who would assert that democratic ideals of American education will not be fulfilled until higher education is more truly accessible to all the citizens. Holding rigidly to the concept that the only true education occurs on campus may be just as elitist as rigid admissions requirements.

For these reasons the University of Nebraska in cooperation with other educational institutions in the state is proposing the development of a multi-media off-campus college program. The program would utilize an existing state-wide educational television network for broadcasting lessons, video cassettes for individually paced instruction would be available at local resource centers, and audio cassettes, textual materials, and learning kits would be available to students at home. Freshman and sophomore courses would be offered. The proposed program, called S-U-N (State University of Nebraska), is now in developmental stages with federal support for experimental production. S-U-N plans to use all the media in a creative fashion.

One of the first program development questions that needed answering was whether or not there was a potential student clientele within the state. Market research is becoming an increasingly used tool of adult and continuing education planners and it certainly has relevance for an external degree program involving the use of costly educational technology (Hertling, 1973).

For Whom?

Sample and Methodology

Two major population groups were sampled: 1) high school juniors and seniors; and 2) adults throughout the state. Phone surveys, mailed questionnaires and personal questionnaires were used.

One hundred high schools were randomly selected from the state's 450 schools with fifty high schools being personally visited and random groups of students shown a presentation of a slide-narration description of a proposed Open University for Nebraska. Another fifty schools were sent descriptive brochures of the proposed program and were asked to distribute them and accompanying questionnaires.

Both high school groups responded to similar questionnaires. High school administrators were asked to select students available during a study hall period or an intact class of a generally required course. There were no indications that this procedure was grossly violated and the students selected are presumed to be reasonably representative of the high school population.

Names, addresses and phone numbers of adults throughout the state were selected by assigning random numbers to towns, phone books, and number of names on a page. All of the adults were sent a descriptive brochure with a cover letter from the president of the University. Half of the adults were asked to complete and return a questionnaire which accompanied the brochure and the other half were told that within a few days they would be called by phone to give their reactions.

The general procedure for all populations included providing the respondent with a description of the proposed program, obtaining his or her reactions to questions designed to assess level of interest and demographic information on educational background and experience.

Table 1 summarizes the number of adults surveyed by phone and mail and high school students who were visited and mailed questionnaires.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Comparison of the mailed and visited high school responses on certain demographic information revealed no significant differences. Adult respondents were quite representative by age and area as indicated by the 1970 census. Despite the fact that phone calls were made during late afternoon and early evening hours, significantly more women than men responded to the phone call, while men tended to complete the mailed survey.

Results

The results will be discussed in terms of three major questions: 1) what were the general reactions of people to the proposed program? 2) what was the extent of serious interest after responses were screened? and 3) what were the unique characteristics and needs of the potential clientele?

What were the general reactions? Table 2, which follows, summarizes the reactions of high school students and adults to general interest questions. A clear majority agreed that a multi-media off-campus collegiate program could be as effective as current teaching-learning practices, over 90% felt comfortable enough with the concept to recommend it to others, and about half stated that someone in their immediate family might be interested in the program. These responses called for little or no commitment and must be interpreted conservatively. Those surveyed were presented with a relatively novel idea for a new educational program (only about 10% had heard about the program before being questioned). This level of positive response does suggest, however, that many people remain open to new program concepts for higher education.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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What was the extent of serious interest in the program? As most social scientists recognize, feeling good about a program or concept does not necessarily result in behavioral action or change. Sophisticated pollsters realize that not all of those who favor a political candidate are going to vote for him on election day. Various screening devices are employed to determine the likelihood of a respondent actually going to the polls. The same problem, perhaps with even more complications, prevailed for this survey. Being favorably disposed toward the S-U-N program and expressing an interest in taking courses does not necessarily foretell actual enrollment. This is especially true when financial limitations or life circumstances may have a direct effect on planning.

For these reasons an attempt was made to control for such contingencies by asking questions which call for background information and expression of a deeper interest in the program. Respondents were asked questions about their likelihood of enrolling for courses in the fall or at some time in the near future and whether or not they wished to be put on a mailing list. The results for high school students and adults are presented in Table 3.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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Not reported in this table is the finding that 71% of the teachers, independently surveyed, thought they would personally enroll, if an appropriate course was available. While some teachers were interested in graduate courses, a sizeable number wanted undergraduate courses which could strengthen their teaching majors.

To determine the percentage of respondents who would most likely be candidates for actual enrollment in a program like S-U-N, the data were subjected to several screening sorts. Four critical criteria served as the first sort and included: 1) having completed the survey; 2) indicating an interest in taking courses; 3) indicating they would "very likely" take a course in the fall, and 4) expressing an interest in being put on a mailing list. Finally, after being screened for favorable responses to these criteria, respondents were further screened on the basis of their interests and background as indicated by answers to questions related to their reading habits, previous exposure to education and civic interests. These activities have been found to be highly correlated with participation in adult education activities (Grabowski, 1972). Somewhat arbitrarily, the cutoff on this screening sort was established to be a positive response to at least two activities and experiences from a list of four. The results of this screening process are presented in Table 4.

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Insert Table 4 about here

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This screening process can be envisioned as a sifting process with each sieve (criteria sort) resulting in fewer likely clientele candidates. This process has been demonstrated in Figure I. It is important to note that this process remains incomplete. There are at least three more sorts which will take place, but for which data are not available. Do those interested feel they have access to sufficient funds and will their life circumstances permit enrollment? (Preliminary results of a follow-up survey now being conducted suggests that typical tuition costs do not significantly reduce the percentage interested.) A yet to be completed survey of California residents suggests estimated enrollees in an external degree program to be 150,000 (McGrath, 1973). Of course the final sort is actual enrollment.

Though the results must be interpreted conservatively, it is worth noting that it is possible that included in the non-respondent group in the phone and mail adult groups were some who might be potential students but who were not inclined to complete a questionnaire.

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Insert Figure I about here

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Finally, what were the unique characteristics and needs of the potential target audience? Table 5 compares the interested and not interested adult phone respondents on several key variables. The interested group was younger on the average and better educated. It also included more active readers and participators in community affairs. There was no significant difference in sex or number of children. However, the most noteworthy finding was the tremendous diversity of the interested group, which certainly cannot be called homogeneous. While 17% of those expressing an interest in the program were not high school graduates, 19% were college graduates. Though the mean age of the interested adults was

significantly lower than the non-interested, over half of those interested were over 30 years old.

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Insert Table 5 about here

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Reasons for being interested in the program were as varied as were the backgrounds, however, most of the given reasons clustered around convenience and being able to work at their own pace. Although personal enrichment holds an interest for many adults, this sampled population were also interested in basic college courses. Table 6 presents the first and second choices of those surveyed from among a list of college courses presented.

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Insert Table 6 about here

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Interested high school students tended to be juniors who were hoping to accelerate their educational program while still in high school or seniors who did not plan to attend a residential college. The most prominent disadvantage students listed for such a program was fear of lack of personal attention.

Implications

There are important implications from these findings for those considering or planning open universities and external degree programs. First of all, though they may not generalize equally well to other states, the results suggest that a significant percentage of the population would pursue higher education if it was readily available, convenient and relevant. (Preliminary results of a regional survey suggest consistent findings.) There are people interested in learning and in higher education whose life circumstances do not permit enrollment on a college campus.

The heterogeneity of the potential clientele is awesome as well as challenging. If the learning experiences are to meet the needs and interests of individual students, a great variety of supplementary or optional alternative course material will have to be designed. Methods of instructing the old and young, the highly motivated and the student with a history of failure, will have to be devised that are beneficial for all. This is a quest yet unfulfilled in the college campus classroom, but it is even more challenging with new students utilizing new media.

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF PERSONS SAMPLED WITHIN VARIOUS POPULATION CATEGORIES

	High School Students		General Adults	
	Visited	Mailed	Phoned	Mailed
Original Sample	1600	515	850	850
Useable Questionnaires	1564	500	480	240
Did not Answer Phone or Mail Returned	NA	NA	176	55
Answered Phone, but Expressed No Interest and/or Did Not Complete Survey	NA	NA	194*	555*
Total Countable Responses	1564	500	674	795

Total Surveyed -- 3533

*In all instances reported in further tabulations, this group is entered into calculations as being not interested.

TABLE 2

GENERAL REACTIONS TO THE S-U-N CONCEPT

	High School Students	General Adults	Teachers and School Officials
1. Yes, I believe that a student can learn as much in a multi-media approach as in a regular classroom.	69%	68%	90%
2. I would recommend this program to people I know who are capable of handling college work.	90%	94%	95%
3. Yes, someone in my immediate family might be interested in taking a course.	47%	15%*	NA

* Calculated on the basis of all sampled, including non-respondents

TABLE 3

EXPRESSION OF SERIOUS INTEREST IN THE S-U-N PROGRAM

	High School Students		General Adults*	
	Visit	Mail	Phone	Mail
1. I would like to earn college credit in a program like the one described.	66%	66%	20%	12%
2. It is "Very Likely" or "Somewhat Likely" that would sign up for one or two courses next fall.	46%	47%	13%	6.7%
3. It is "Very Likely" that I would sign up for one or two courses next fall.	15%	8%	6.8%	2.1%
4. It is "Very Likely" that I might sign up for courses sometime in the future.	26%	25%	NA	4%
5. I would like to be put on a mailing list to receive more information.	47%	37%	45%	13%

* All percentages presented for adults are based on the total sample, not just the respondents.

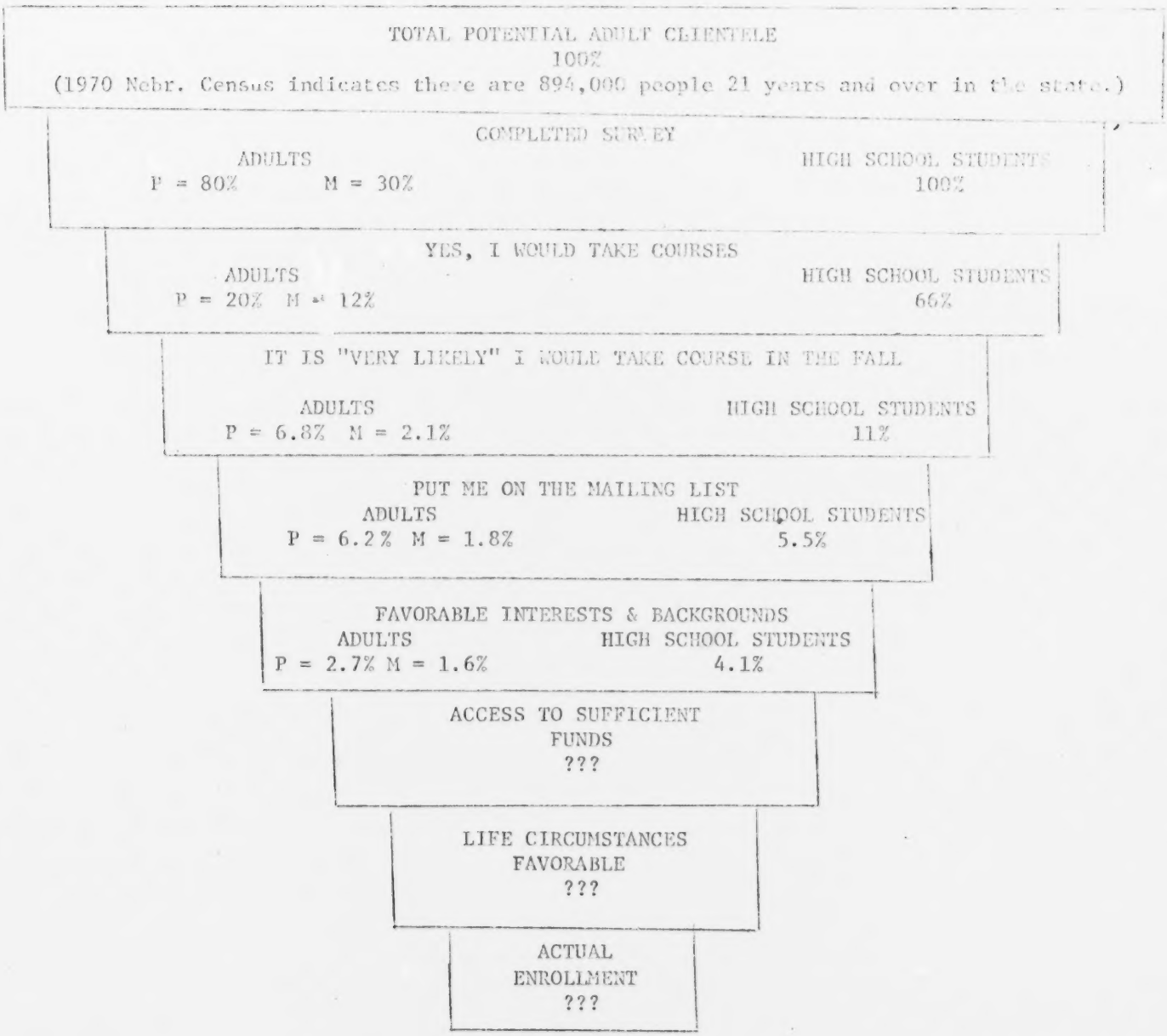
TABLE 4

SCREENING PROCESS FOR POTENTIAL S-U-N CLIENTELE
FOR SERIOUSNESS OF INTEREST AND LIKELIHOOD FOR ENROLLMENT

Screening Items	Adult Respondents		High School Respondents
	Mail	Phone	
1. Completed survey	30%	80%	100%
2. Said they would be interested in taking courses.	12%	20%	66%
3. Interested in taking courses and said likelihood was "Very Likely."	2.1%	6.8%	11%
4. Interested in taking courses, likelihood "Very Likely" and wanted on mailing list.	1.8%	6.2%	5.5%
5. Interested in taking courses, likelihood "Very Likely," wanted on mailing list, and have favorable interests and background.	1.6%	2.7%	4.1%

FIGURE I

S-U-N POTENTIAL CLIENTELE SCREENING*



P = Phone Survey Respondents

M = Mail Survey Respondents

* All percentages based on total sampled, not just actual respondents.

TABLE 5

COMPARATIVE PROFILE OF INTERESTED AND NOT INTERESTED ADULT CLIENTELE

(Based on Phone Survey Data)

	Interested	Not Interested
Age (Mean)	35	47
Over 30	59%	77%
Over 40	31%	61%
Over 50	14%	44%
Sex -- Male	37%	34%
Female	63%	66%
Number of Children (Mean)	1.8	1.8
Occupation		
Business - Professional	19%	14%
Skilled - Semi-skilled	22%	20%
Farmers - Ranchers	3%	4%
Housewives	28%	31%
Students	13%	8%
Clerical	2%	6%
Retired	2%	13%
Education		
Less than High School	4%	14%
Some High School	13%	12%
High School Graduate	42%	37%
Some College	37%	20%
College Graduate	19%	17%
Interests and Activities		
Have taken Adult Education or Correspondence Course	46%	27%
Read Magazines or Books Regularly	79%	69%
Have been College Students	46%	39%
Active in Civic, Community Affairs	43%	41%

TABLE 6

COURSES OF INTEREST

	High School Students		General Adults	
	1st Choice	2nd Choice	1st Choice	2nd Choice
ART	14%	10%	8%	5%
ACCOUNTING	17%	15%	24%	13%
BIOLOGY	14%	12%	5%	4%
PHILOSOPHY	3%	7%	3%	6%
PHYSIOLOGY	3%	6%	--	9%
PSYCHOLOGY	16%	16%	16%	20%
SOCIOLOGY	7%	19%	8%	23%
OTHERS	26%	15%	37%	20%

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